

# Blogging Tools

If you want to join the world and his wife in writing an online blog, Adam Banks shows you how to do it – and puts three tools designed for the task to the test

**Y**ou can't fail to have noticed the rise of the blog. Celebrities write them, news breaks on them, their authors are the media pundits *du jour*, and if you type a web address incorrectly these days you're probably more likely to hit a blog than a porn site. That's how popular they've become. So it may be time to get one of your own.

A blog, short for 'weblog', is essentially an online diary in which you record your thoughts on life in general or a topic of your choice. A blog can exist within a website, but more often it's a site in itself, and it's a very easy kind of website to set up. Most blogs take the same basic form. The main part of the page is taken up with the content, which consists of 'posts'. A post is a chunk of text – a news story, diary entry or feature article, depending on the nature of your blog – with a headline that says what it's about, a footer that says who wrote it and when, and perhaps a picture or video clip. Usually, the latest posts continue down the page. Above them, there's a bar across the top containing your blog's title and description, and to the left or right are sidebars with links to other posts, background information and related sites.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Blogs aren't just for amateur gossip columnists. Businesses increasingly use them for both internal and external communication, and they're ideal for any organisation that needs to keep in touch with a community. The easiest way to create one is to use an online blogging tool, which you access through your web browser. We've reviewed the three most popular: Blogger, TypePad and WordPress.

Each of these tools allows you to pick a template for your blog, customise it and publish it. You can then add posts whenever you like, from any PC. Your blog is usually hosted automatically on a central server, and its web address will be something along the lines of [www.myname.myblogtool.com](http://www.myname.myblogtool.com). If you own a domain name, such as [www.myname.com](http://www.myname.com), you may be able to 'map' this on to your blog so that visitors are invisibly redirected, or perhaps host the blog on your own server.

All these blogging tools offer a selection of neat and attractive templates. As well as entering your own text, you'll have some control over appearance and layout. Beyond that, the scope for customisation varies. You can add extra features as 'widgets', ready-made features that are compatible with your blogging tool, which may come from its maker or third parties (try [www.widgetbox.com](http://www.widgetbox.com)). Alternatively, you may need to paste a code snippet into your blog template or into an individual post to add a third-party feature or link to external content. For example, if you upload a video clip to YouTube, you're given a code snippet that you can use to display that clip within your blog.

It's increasingly common, and easy, to make small amounts of money by including advertising in your blog. You'll earn a tiny payment each time a visitor clicks on an ad and/or goes on to buy something from its originator. You sign up for automated advertising from a service such as Google AdSense ([www.google.com/adsense](http://www.google.com/adsense)) or a scheme such as Amazon Associates (<http://affiliate-program.amazon.co.uk:80/gp/associates/join>), then

follow the instructions to include ads in your blog template or add links to relevant posts.

## FAIR COMMENT

A few extra features have become popular elements of the blogging experience, and all three tools reviewed here support them. Commenting allows visitors to add their views to each post; you can turn this off if you'd rather they didn't, or set up moderated commenting so that nothing appears until you've approved it. Taking this a step further, a blog can have multiple users, so that several people can add posts or make changes.

Publishing an RSS 'feed' of your blog enables users to sign up and be notified whenever you add a new post, which they can then read within a browser such as Internet Explorer 7 or a separate program such as NetNewsWire ([www.news-gator.com](http://www.news-gator.com)). Because RSS is a standardised delivery format, it allows sites such as Feedster ([www.feedster.com](http://www.feedster.com)), Technorati ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)) and WebLogs ([www.weblogs.com](http://www.weblogs.com)) to collate content from millions of blogs, and if yours is one of them, you could attract a much wider audience. Blogger, TypePad and WordPress can all generate an RSS feed and 'ping' one or more of the above services whenever you update your blog.

Rel tags are the latest way to help make sense of blogs. A rel tag adds a keyword to a post which links to a 'tag space'. For example, if you add `<a href="http://technorati.com/tag/wombat" rel="tag">Wombat</a>` to a post about wombats, a visitor will see the word 'Wombat' as a hyperlink. Clicking this link will take them to a page at Technorati.com that lists posts about wombats on other blogs. Technorati hosts the original and best-known tag space, so rel tags are often referred to as 'Technorati tags', although other blog indexers can also pick them up. All the tools we've reviewed now have built-in options to apply categories or labels to your posts, which also act as rel tags.

All three tools reviewed here have something to offer. Each succeeds in its own way up to a point, but none has achieved the ideal combination of integrated features, flexibility, ease of use and price. Our overall winner is Blogger – by a nose. However, we recommend you read the reviews, consider what's important to you, try all three systems (TypePad is free for 30 days), and pick the one you think you can stick with.



▲ Setting up a blog is easy with one of the three online blogging tools here, so you can make your views known across the world and perhaps even make some money

# SOFTWARE LABS

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## Blogger

★★★★★

Free



Blogger is a well-established online blogging tool, and is completely free. Founded in 1999, it was bought in 2003 by Google. Increased resources have brought more features, and in November 2006 Blogger shifted to a completely revised version, which is still described as 'Beta'.

Blogger offers a good choice of templates, and you can set up a blog and get it working in minutes. Originally, customising a template meant editing its HTML code by hand, but the new Layouts feature in Beta lets you fiddle around quite extensively using a visual editor. You'll still need some understanding of HTML and web serving to set up anything beyond a very generic-looking blog, though. For example, some templates include an image in the header bar, but there's currently no way of replacing it with your own graphic except by uploading it and editing the link manually.

On the plus side, you have full access to the code, so unlimited customisation is possible. There are plenty of tips and code snippets on the web for Blogger users, although you'll need to check that they apply to Beta. Unfortunately, Blogger's own help section includes quite a lot of outdated advice.

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to get started with
- ✓ Full access to template code
- ✗ Can be tricky and flakey

SUPPLIER [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)

Blogger Beta is based on dynamic publishing, where pages are generated on the fly by the server when viewed, rather than being created once when you update your blog. This makes it quicker to save changes and enables new features such as organising blog entries in different ways and editing templates more flexibly. Many of these potential benefits have yet to be implemented, however, and it's not clear what limitations will apply if you choose to host your blog on your own server rather than accepting free hosting at [www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com). Still, Blogger is the only tool here that lets you serve your own blog, and once you've entered your FTP settings there's no extra hassle involved.

Beta adds support for labels (categories), which was previously missing from Blogger. There's also a new system to help developers create widgets, and the visual editor makes it easy to add them to your layout. Thanks to the Google connection, incorporating AdSense advertising is especially easy, so Blogger is probably the fastest route to a potentially money-making site – though not the most



▲ Blogger makes it simple to set up a good-looking blog in a few minutes, and a basic level of customisation is well supported

scalable one if you get more ambitious. You can add other schemes such as Amazon Associates by pasting their supplied code snippets into your template. There are also easy ways to link to content on hosts such as YouTube and Flickr.

Existing Blogger users are invited to switch to Beta with the promise that "your blogs will stay the same [and] their content and layout will not change". This isn't necessarily true unless the existing blog was based on a standard template. Blogger Beta is stricter about HTML checking, and if your existing blog has been hacked around a bit, it may throw up errors. While the Beta version has its drawbacks, Blogger is currently the most versatile blogging tool that you can use for free and without any special skills.

## TypePad

★★★★★

From \$49 (around £25) per year

TypePad has an excellent pedigree, coming from Six Apart, one of the key movers in the blogging industry and the maker of the respected business blogging system Movable Type. You get excellent templates, a growing range of useful and reliable features, plenty of widgets, good integration with other tools and services, and the kudos of sharing your choice of service with some of the most respected bloggers.

The catch is that it isn't free, although current exchange rates make it affordable. A Basic Level account costs \$4.95 (around £2.50) per month or \$49 (around £25) per year for one single-user blog. There's a storage limit of 100MB, so if you want to post a lot of pictures or videos, you may have to link them from somewhere such as Flickr or YouTube. Plus Level gives you 500MB and multiple blogs for \$89 (around £45) a year, while Pro, at \$149 (around £76), comes with 1GB of storage and allows multiple authors on multiple blogs.

All accounts also have a bandwidth limit that caps the amount of data downloaded

from your site in a monthly period. This is 2GB, 5GB or 10GB, depending on your level. If you posted a dozen 500K files, and a dozen people viewed them every

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✓ Lots of well-presented features
- ✗ Cheaper versions are limited

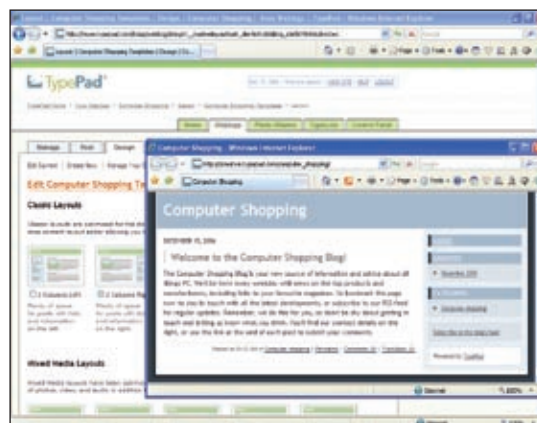
SUPPLIER [www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com)

day, you'd break the 2GB limit, so it's not very high. TypePad isn't charging for excess bandwidth use at the moment, but the company will contact users who "exceed the limit by too much" asking them to reduce their traffic or upgrade.

When you compare this with what Blogger gives you for free you may not be overwhelmed by the generosity of TypePad's offerings, but it does what it does with a certain style. The templates look good, the widgets are plentiful, the help is helpful and you might be able to complete a decent modern blog using the tools provided without having to trawl the web for hacks. Even Basic templates have cool features such as category clouds ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag\\_Cloud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag_Cloud)) as standard.

Making your blog look unique and distinctive is harder, though. With a Basic account, you're stuck with the predefined templates. Users of the Plus version get limited tweaking, reminiscent

of Blogger pre-Beta, but only Pro users can fully personalise their site design, either by modifying the template's CSS to change its appearance or by switching to Advanced



▲ Although TypePad isn't free, it does offer a large number of good features and works hard to make them easy to use

Template Sets to edit the whole structure. All sites are hosted by TypePad; if you want to use your own domain, you'll need a Plus or Pro account to enable mapping.

TypePad provides Text Ads and Tip Jar features to generate revenue. These are available only to Pro users, but widgets from the likes of CafePress and Zazzle are available to all accounts, while Amazon Associates can automatically link to relevant products from their TypeLists of favourite books or music. TypePad also recommends Qumana's Q-Ads, which lets you insert relevant advertising into posts. Bear in mind, however, that unless you have a Pro account you can't get at your site's code, so you can't add any features manually that aren't built in or available as widgets.

# WordPress.com



Free (plus optional upgrades)

WordPress.com is different from the other blogging services. It's kind of small, kind of open source and kind of free. WordPress itself (<http://wordpress.org>) is a "semantic personal publishing platform", which in English means blog software that you install on a web server. WordPress.com is an online blogging service run by the same people. It may not have the financial or marketing clout of Blogger or TypePad, but it's famously good at what it does, and WordPress.com is an easy and friendly place to create your blog.

Getting started is just as easy as it is with Blogger, and the supplied templates are neat and attractive. There's also a small but useful selection of widgets, which you can add to your sidebar or footer by dragging and dropping. While it's nowhere near as directly interactive as Blogger's Layout feature, this lets you control the order in which items appear.

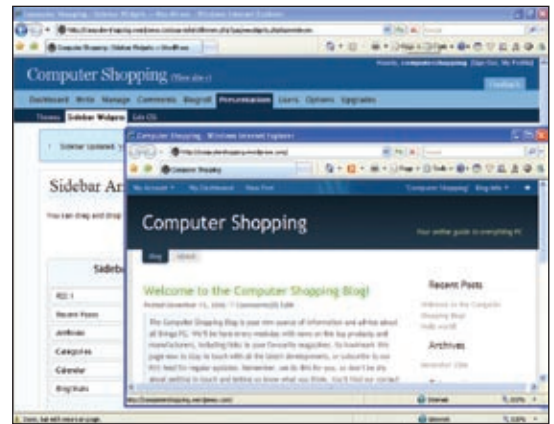
One thing you won't find is any support for revenue generation. There are no widgets for advertising or affiliate services, and as you can't get at your site's HTML, and adding any kind of script is prohibited, you can't insert them manually. That's no accident: WordPress.com is openly

hostile to revenue generation and deliberately blocks any kind of advertising. You're allowed "one discreet text link" to an affiliate site – that's one per blog, not per post.

WordPress.com has other serious limitations. For images, you get a meagre 50MB of storage. That rules out regular posting of decent-sized photos. Video, flash and other media are not allowed, although you can link to clips hosted on specific services, including YouTube and GoogleVideo.

You can buy extra space for pics, starting from \$20 (around £10) a year for 1GB. Other traditional limitations of WordPress.com have also been addressed by paid 'upgrades'. Unlike Blogger, WordPress.com doesn't let you host your own blog, but you can now map your own domain to your blog, as with TypePad, for \$10 a year (about a fiver). Nor can you edit WordPress.com templates or create your own, but for \$15 a year (around £7.60) you can add

your own CSS instructions, which override those in the template, enabling you to change fonts, colours, styles and so on. If you need more customisation, you're deemed to be the kind of



▲ WordPress.com is a growing blogging service based on open source software. Features are limited, but it works very well

user who should install WordPress on your own server, where you can tweak to your heart's content. Many users will find themselves stuck in the middle, wanting more customisation but having no inclination to become a web monkey.

So far, WordPress.com users don't seem too bothered by its shortcomings. As the name suggests, WordPress blogs tend to consist mainly of text, and the many high-profile bloggers who use it (<http://wordpress.com/notable-users>) are typically serious writers rather than multimedia-savvy youth – the sort of people who prefer to express themselves through content, and leave style in the capable hands of the template designers. If that sounds like you, WordPress.com could be exactly the niche you're looking for.

## SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✓ Friendly, sensible community
- ✗ Some features unavailable or extra cost

SUPPLIER <http://wordpress.com>

## Key bloggers Alternative approaches

There are plenty of other ways to create a blog. You may decide you don't even need a blog. If you're into sharing photos, for example, an account with Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) may suffice; if you're more interested in social networking, MySpace might fit the bill. If your main aim is to allow multiple users to communicate and collaborate, you may need a wiki rather than a blog. A wiki is a space where multiple users can share, edit and maintain documents, and can be used for knowledge sharing or as an intranet. Wiki tools are mostly open source; popular choices include TWiki (<http://twiki.org>) and MediaWiki ([www.mediawiki.org](http://www.mediawiki.org)).

Vox is a fairly new blogging service that doesn't let you design your own site but does offer gorgeous templates. As befits the 21st-century blogger, it's hot on multimedia and tags. Although you could use it for almost any kind of blog, it's aimed at the friends-and-family market, with an emphasis on privacy; rather than trying to publish your life to the world, it's all about controlling who can see your stuff. The idea is that the people you want to share with join up, too, creating an 'online neighbourhood'.

LiveJournal is another blogging tool with a social networking aspect. Like Vox, it's owned by Six Apart, but it's been going since 1999. There are three account levels: Basic is free, Plus is also free but includes advertising (they make money from it, not you), and Paid costs from \$20 (around £10) a year.



▲ Services such as Vox make it even easier to set up a site and become part of an online community, while advanced solutions such as Movable Type offer more flexibility for serious blogging

Only Paid users get full customisation, search and picture storage facilities; with a free account, you can include a picture in a post only by linking to an image file stored elsewhere. Clever features such as widgets are missing, and LiveJournal communities are closer to MySpace territory.

Blogware is a blogging tool that's designed to be sold to the public by resellers, who package and price it as they wish. It's not widely offered in the UK, but you may find it if you're buying web services for business.

Rather than using an online blogging tool, you may prefer to create, update and host your own site using installed software. This is strictly for users keen to get their hands dirty, but there are some excellent open-source systems available, including BLOG:CMS

(<http://blogcms.com>), Bloxom ([www.bloxom.com](http://www.bloxom.com)), Nucleus (<http://nucleuscms.org>), Serendipity ([www.s9y.org](http://www.s9y.org)), and WordPress (<http://wordpress.org>). Textpattern ([www.textpattern.com](http://www.textpattern.com)) is a unique text preparation, content management and publishing package with elements of wiki and blog about it. They all require some understanding of web serving and technologies such as PHP and SQL.

If your ambitions go beyond blogging and into web publishing, you'll want to consider advanced software that enables you to create and manage content-based sites. These include Six Apart's Movable Type ([www.movabletype.org](http://www.movabletype.org)), Expression Engine ([www.pmachine.com](http://www.pmachine.com)) and Traction ([www.tractionsoftware.com](http://www.tractionsoftware.com)). ☐